



PLA Naval Aviation Reorganization 2023

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Realignment of PLAN Aviation Units

In early 2023, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) began transferring PLA Navy Aviation units to the PLA Air Force. By mid-2023, the PLA transferred the majority of PLAN fighter, bomber, radar, air defense, and airfield units to the PLA Air Force (PLAAF). In total, the PLA transferred at least three fighter brigades, two bomber regiments, three radar brigades, three air defense brigades, and numerous airfield stations. The table below summarizes the status of PLAN aviation units:

Unit	Theater Subordination	Transferred to PLAAF?
1st Aviation Division (Special Mission Aircraft)	ETC	No
4th Aviation Brigade	ETC	Yes
6th Aviation Brigade	ETC	Yes
Eastern Theater Navy Bomber Regiment	ETC	Yes
Eastern Theater Navy Air Defense Brigade	ETC	Yes
2nd Radar Brigade	ETC	Yes
Eastern Theater Navy UAV Regiment	ETC	No
2nd Aviation Division (Special Mission Aircraft)	NTC	No
5th Aviation Brigade	NTC	Status Unknown
11th Aviation Brigade	NTC	No
Northern Theater Navy Air Defense Brigade	NTC	Yes
4th Radar Brigade	NTC	Yes
3rd Aviation Division (Special Mission Aircraft)	STC	No
8th Aviation Brigade	STC	No
9th Aviation Brigade	STC	Yes
10th Aviation Brigade	STC	No
Southern Theater Navy Bomber Regiment	STC	Yes
Southern Theater Navy Air Defense Brigade	STC	Yes
3rd Radar Brigade	STC	Yes
Southern Theater Navy UAV Regiment	STC	No

Figure 1: Status of PLAN Aviation Units

We base this assessment on press reporting on these units between January and July 2023. The body of press reporting shows unit personnel wearing PLAAF uniforms or explicitly identifies units as “Air Force” units. The PLAN still retains control over its helicopter, unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), and carrier-based aviation units. The PLAN also still maintains several aviation training units, headquarters aviation elements, and select airfield stations.

It remains unclear why the PLAN retained a single ground-based fighter brigade in the form of the 8th Aviation Brigade. It is possible that the PLAN wants to retain at least a small ground-based fighter inventory to help support extensive operations in the South China Sea. Alternatively, this unit may be slated for conversion to a carrier-based fighter like the J-15. However, the latter hypothesis runs contrary to the PLAN’s typical model of standing up new carrier-based aviation units rather than converting pre-existing formations.

Implications for PLA Maritime Operations

In terms of maritime capabilities, this transfer of forces places greater demands on the theater joint command system when executing maritime strikes. Previously, in having its own maritime strike aircraft, the PLAN could execute relatively complex maritime strikes without leveraging kinetic capabilities from the other PLA services. However, between the growing emphasis on multidomain operations, PLAAF maritime strike capabilities, and PLA Rocket Force multidomain fires, an increasing portion of maritime strike missions are joint in nature. As such, aligning all air-based maritime strike capabilities under the PLAAF is in line with pre-existing joint command modernization efforts.

A potentially more significant implication is that the transfer of PLAN JH-7 and H-6 aircraft strips the PLAN of most of its minelaying aircraft. Unless the PLAAF integrates minelaying topics into its own training outline, this leaves PLAN Y-9 anti-submarine warfare aircraft as the only aircraft that train to conduct minelaying.

Despite this loss of kinetic capabilities, the PLAN still has organic information enablers in the form airborne early warning aircraft, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft, anti-submarine aircraft, as well as UAVs. If the PLA had removed these airborne assets from PLAN control, then the PLAN would constantly have to ask for support or control over said PLAAF assets. This in turn could significantly strain theater headquarters, theater navy, and theater air force staff workloads as they attempt to manage PLAN requests for PLAAF assets.

Implications for the PLA Air Operations

This realignment has two clear benefits to PLA air operations. Firstly, by aligning aircraft and ground-based integrated air defense units under the PLAAF, the PLA improves administrative management over these types of forces. Under the previous arrangement of the PLAN having its own fighter, bomber, air defense, and air surveillance radar units separate from the PLAAF, the PLA had two separated management chains over similar types of personnel and equipment. For example, PLAN and PLAAF H-6 bomber pilots adhered to different training guidance despite flying the same airframe. Bringing similar types of units under the same

administrative structure streamlines bureaucratic duplication and improves standardization across units with identical functions.

Secondly, this realignment also unifies all defensive air operations under theater command air forces rather than having it split between two theater services. Prior to the realignment, PLAN units appeared to have exclusive responsibility over air defense missions in certain parts of PRC airspace including a roughly 250km swath of coastline between Zhoushan and Wenzhou along with the entirety of Hainan.

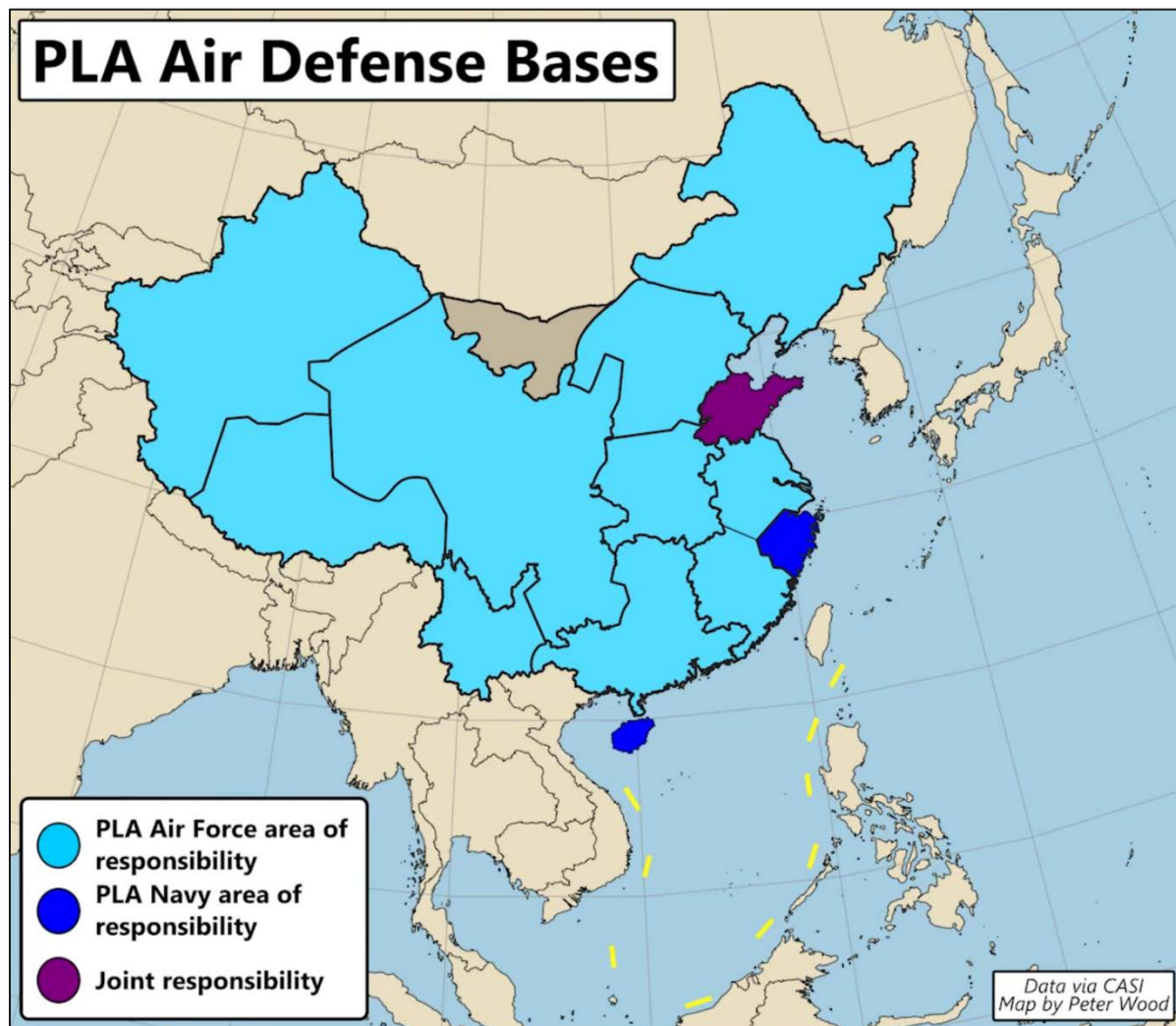


Figure 2: PLA air defense responsibilities prior to the 2023 realignment

There were no PLAAF radar or ground-based air defense units covering these coastal areas, and the closest ground-based fighter units were often a PLAN aviation unit. By realigning these former PLAN units under the PLAAF, the PLA did away with a potential geographic seam in the command and control of air defense missions.

Outlook

In addition to the improvements to PLA air operations, this realignment supports the PLAN's long-term ambitions to build out a mature carrier-based aviation force. By divesting themselves of thousands of billets, multiple pieces of infrastructure, and numerous airframes, the PLAN is now free to pursue a more carrier-centric force within the constraints of its current level of resourcing. Currently, the PLAN fields two carrier-based fighter brigades and there are indications that PLAN J-15 carrier-based fighters now frequently operate out of one of the PLAN's Feidong Airfield in Eastern Theater Command.



Figure 3: A J-15 parked at Feidong Airfield in 2022

It remains unclear whether the PLAAF will retain these newly gained resources in the long-term. Although most of the systems the PLAAF received from the PLAN are relatively modern assets, maintaining upwards of two dozen regiment and brigade-level organizations is not an insignificant commitment in assets and personnel. Some of these systems provide crucial capacity. The previously PLAN-owned air surveillance radar sites provide the only form of ground-based air surveillance in some littoral areas and previously PLAN-operated H-6 bombers allow the PLAAF to commit a larger number of bomber units towards its new nuclear mission without eating into its conventional strike force.



Figure 4: A PLAAF J-10C operating from the previously PLAN-operated Ledong Airfield

In all, this shift represents a noticeable change in the way the PLA organizes itself. Whether this was done voluntarily by the services or mandated from above, doing away with redundant capabilities across services demonstrates a marked improvement in PLA jointness.

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Appendix: Status of PLAN Aviation Units

In the Eastern Theater Command, the PLA almost certainly converted the PLAN's former 4th Aviation Brigade, 6th Aviation Brigade, Eastern Theater Navy (ETN) bomber regiment, ETN Air Defense Brigade, and 2nd Radar Brigade into PLAAF units. We base this assessment on press reporting on these units between January and July 2023. This body of press reporting shows unit personnel wearing PLAAF uniforms or explicitly identifies units as "Air Force" units. The PLAN still retains control over the ETN's 1st Aviation, UAV regiment, and helicopter regiment. ETN also retains control over Feidong Airfield, which is used for a mix of J-15 fighter operations and PLANMC rotary wing operations.

In the Southern Theater Command, the PLA almost certainly converted the PLAN's former 9th Aviation Brigade, Southern Theater Navy (STN) Bomber Regiment, STN Air Defense Brigade, and 3rd Radar Brigade. The PLAN appears to have retained the 8th Aviation Brigade, 10th Aviation Brigade (J-15 equipped), 3rd Aviation Division, UAV regiment, and Helicopter Regiment. We have not identified the status of PLAN airfields in the Paracel and Spratly Islands.

In the Northern Theater Command, the PLA almost certainly converted the PLAN's former Northern Theater Navy (NTN) Air Defense Brigade and 4th Radar Brigade into PLAAF units. The PLAN still controls the 11th Aviation Brigade (J-15 equipped), 2nd Aviation Division, NTN Helicopter Regiment, and most of the aviation assets under the PLAN Aviation University, Carrier Aircraft Test and Training Base, and PLAN Headquarters.